

2. HISTORY OF SEATTLE'S PARK SYSTEM

Parks have been a major part of life in Seattle since its earliest days. Barely three decades after the landing of the Denny party, Seattle established its first public park. Since then, parks have been added in several bursts of acquisition and development, averaging 2-1/3 parks – or 40 acres – per year.

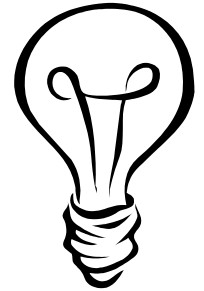
Perhaps the single greatest influence on Seattle's parks is the City's magnificent natural setting. This lush environment has inspired both an appreciation of nature and a conservation ethic. Throughout the years, Seattleites have shown a genuine affection for their park system and a serious commitment to providing the wide range of recreational opportunities Seattle offers its citizens. Seattle's park system today – one of the most extensive in the nation – is a reflection of this affection.

This chapter outlines the history of Seattle's park system and relates it to contemporary events and ideas both within and outside of Seattle. This history provides the context for examining Seattle's park resources, evaluating their historical significance, and establishing a management strategy.

Important Ideas

Even though early Seattle residents were many hundreds or thousands of miles from other major cities, concepts and ideas that originated in other parts of the country had an enormous impact on Seattle's development. From the City Beautiful Movement to post-World War II suburbanization, Seattle's attitude towards its parks and recreation system has changed over the years under the influence of outside events.

On the following pages, the important ideas that played a role in shaping Seattle's parks and recreation system are highlighted to give depth and understanding to changing circumstances and attitudes.



Growth of Seattle's Park System

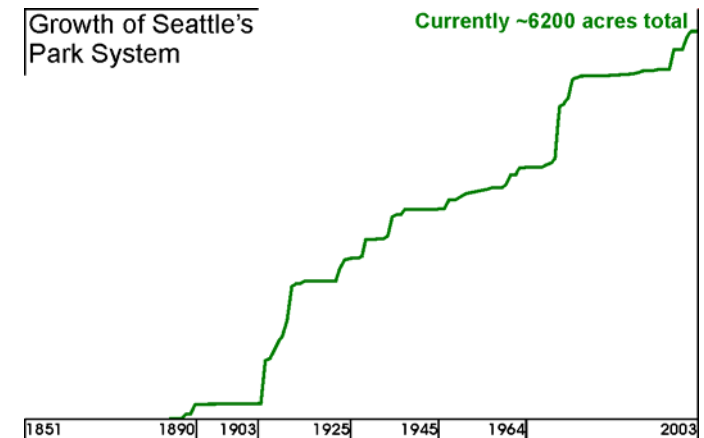


Figure 3: Parks Growth, overall.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

1851-1890

On November 13, 1851, at Alki Point, the first European American settlers arrived in what is today Seattle. They quickly got to work establishing a settlement, negotiating with native residents, and sparking commerce. By 1880, Seattle citizens had opened a saw mill, founded a university, started a newspaper, established a library, opened a hospital, built a theatre, and created a lively city of 3,533 residents.

1884:
Denny Park
established, to be
managed by three park
commissioners

In 1884, 33 years after settlement, Seattle initiated its parks system. David Denny donated a 5-acre tract of land to the city, stipulating that the land, which was a cemetery at the time, be converted to a public park. Ordinance 571 accepted Denny's land donation, made allowances for its conversion from a cemetery to a park, and even included provisions that three park commissioners be appointed to oversee the conversion.

1887:
Board of Park
Commissioners
appointed by Council

The first Board of Park Commissioners was established by ordinance three years later. This three-member Council-appointed board was charged with all management responsibilities of the young Seattle park system.

The small number of parks added during this period is due largely to the view of the City Council that park land acquisition was unnecessary and impractical – unnecessary because of the natural forest-like beauty of Seattle and the vast amount of available undeveloped land, and impractical because of the lack of funds.

On June 6, 1889, Seattle residents watched their hard work burn to the ground as the Great Seattle Fire tore through more than 25 downtown blocks.



1889:
Aftermath of the Great
Seattle Fire

Pioneers

Seattle's early history is the colorful story of pioneering hardships, industrial entrepreneurs, real estate developers, and railroad barons. Abundant natural resources and an accessible harbor paved the way for rapid growth. Pictured here is Pioneer Square on June 5, 1889, the heart of the City just a day before the Great Fire. What ultimately distinguished Seattle's urban development from other cities of the period was the relatively early planning and development of a large and varied system of parks and parkways.

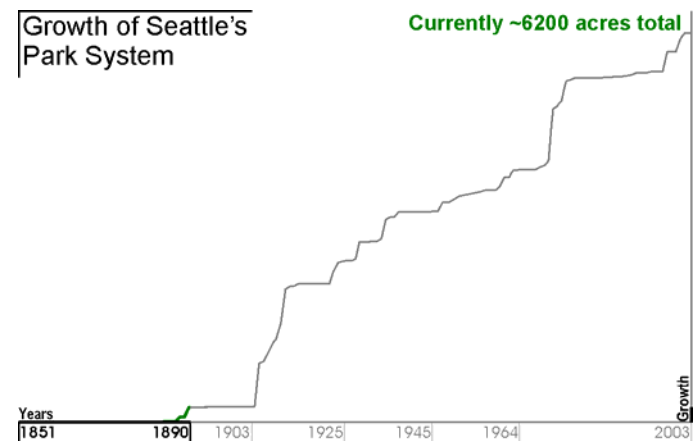
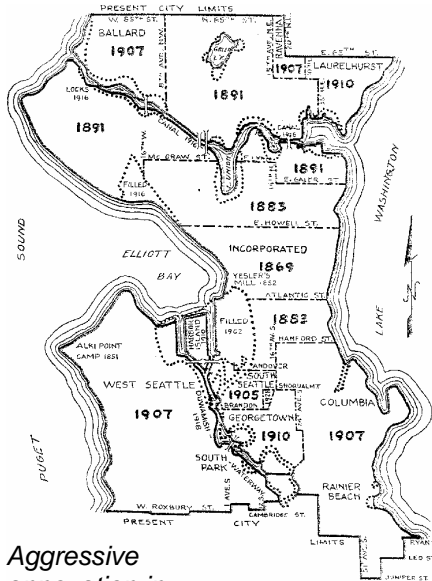
Growth of Seattle's
Park System

Figure 4: Parks Growth, 1851-1890.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

1890-1903

By 1890, Seattle's population had skyrocketed to 42,837 and would nearly double in the 1890's. This rapid population growth and city expansion, coupled with the nation-wide City Beautiful and Urban Parks Movements, prompted a concern for the loss of open space and a desire for planned recreation.



Aggressive annexation in Seattle's early years

1890:
Parks fund established

1892-1896:
First Parks
Comprehensive Plan

1900:
Cotterill publishes a
map detailing Seattle's
bicycle paths


Seattle's first home-rule charter, in 1890, included establishment of the City's first parks fund, whose sources were bond sale proceeds, gifts, Council appropriations, and 10 percent of the gross receipts from all fines, penalties, and licenses. It also increased the number of Park Commissioners from three to five. The Board of Park Commissioners was responsible for all park management, but the Council retained the authority to purchase property.

During the four-year tenure of Seattle's second Parks Superintendent, E. O. Schwagerl, the City adopted its first parks comprehensive plan, which included green spaces at each corner of the city and a boulevard connecting Woodland Park, Ravenna Park, and the new University of Washington campus.

Despite this effort, little was done to expand Seattle's parks system, and in 1896 a new home-rule charter redefined the Board of Park Commissioners, transferring all parks responsibilities to the City Council.

Because of these administrative changes, the City added few new parks and recreation space to the system during this period. That would change in the years to follow, as City Beautiful-inspired landscape architects, the Olmsted Brothers, would make their mark in Seattle.

City Beautiful



The City Beautiful Movement was a well-articulated theory of planning a total city inspired by the beautiful “white city” built for the 1893 Chicago’s World’s Fair. The underlying philosophy was that a clean and beautiful city would be reflected in a good and perfect society. In this premise, the City Beautiful Movement perfectly matched the emerging profession of landscape architecture and its nationwide advocacy for urban park systems. The Urban Parks Movement that emerged was founded on the social principle that the creation of parks would replicate within the city the “good and wholesome” environment of the country.

Growth of Seattle's Park System

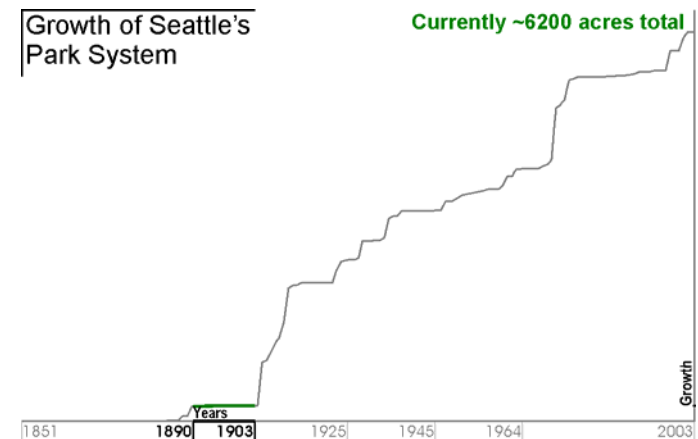


Figure 5: Parks Growth, 1890-1903.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

1903-1925



Men stroll in Denny Park before the Regrade

Circumstances at the beginning of the twentieth century were a catalyst for substantial parks expansion in Seattle. Money from the Klondike Gold Rush helped make Seattle, with a population of roughly 200,000, a well-established and wealthy city. Public support for parks grew and was further stirred by a full-page article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* titled "Let Us Make a Beautiful City of Seattle."

Just seven years after the new city charter shifted parks responsibility to the Council, a charter amendment re-established the Board of Park Commissioners. While the Council retained the authority to approve the purchase of property, the Board was given all park management responsibilities, as well as exclusive authority to spend park fund monies.

1903:
Olmsted Brothers plan is adopted

By autumn of 1903, Seattle's City Council adopted A *Comprehensive System of Parks and Parkways*, a plan prepared by the Olmsted Brothers. The plan mixed formal landscape concepts with preservation of natural areas, added playgrounds and playfields, and featured a system of boulevards encircling the city. Bonds totaling \$4 million (about \$75 million in 2002 dollars) funded the plan and sparked a flurry of aggressive land purchases that would enlarge Seattle's park system by 900 percent over the next 20 years.

1906:
\$500,000 parks bond

Implementation of the 1903 plan – 28 improved parks, 12 equipped playgrounds, 12 unimproved playgrounds, and 15 miles of scenic boulevards -- represents almost 40 percent of Seattle's current park system, which today includes roughly 6,200 acres of parks and recreational facilities.

1907:
Ballard, West Seattle, Columbia City and Rainier Beach are annexed

1908:
\$1,000,000 parks bond

Olmsted Brothers

Continuing in the footsteps of their pioneering father, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., John Charles Olmsted (pictured) and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., refined and popularized Olmstedian notions of landscape design. Though these notions sprung from a youth spent in rural New England, with large rolling lawns and picturesque scenery, Olmsted, Sr. believed in the natural landscape, and a design that was tailored to its particular location. Founded in 1858 and headed by the step-brothers upon the retirement of their father, the Olmsted Brothers firm became a popular choice for landscape design and was soon commissioned for jobs across the country.



Growth of Seattle's Park System

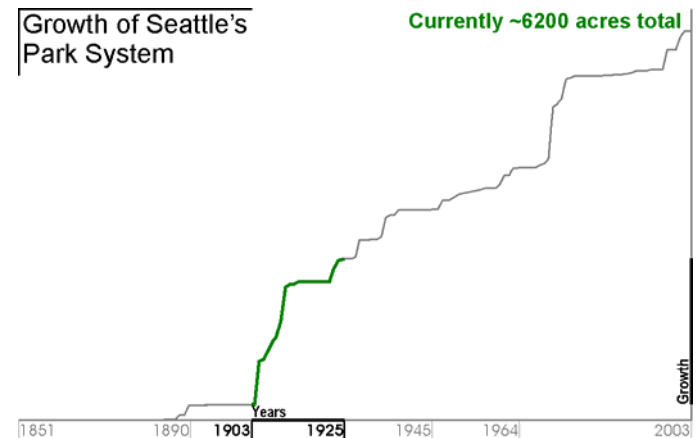




Figure 6: Parks Growth, 1903-1925.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

INTRODUCTION	PAST	IDENTIFICATION	PRESENT	IMPLEMENTATION	FUTURE
<p>1903-1925</p> <p>1908: Supplemental parks report by Olmsted Brothers</p>  <p>1909: Alaska Yukon and Pacific Exposition</p> <p>1910: \$2,000,000 parks bond</p> <p>1912: Bogue plan fails</p> <p>1912: \$500,000 parks bond</p> <p>1925 and 1926: Parks Department is restructured to reflect the economic times</p>	<p>In the early 20th century, Seattle's burgeoning population had few public playgrounds and no supervised recreation programs. To address these needs, the <i>Supplemental 1908 Olmsted Brothers Plan</i> emphasized active recreation projects, including Lincoln Park (now Cal Anderson Park) and the Collins, Miller, and Hiawatha Playfields. A \$2 million bond for parks acquisition was passed by voters in 1910.</p>				
	<p>In 1909, Seattle hosted the Alaska Yukon and Pacific Exposition on the largely undeveloped future campus of the University of Washington. The Exposition site, key components of which are visible today, is one of the best examples of Olmsted's design principles in Seattle.</p>				
	<p>In March 1912, the <i>Supplemental 1908 Olmsted Brothers Plan</i> went to the voters as part of Virgil Bogue's comprehensive plan for ambitious regional parks expansion, among other civic improvements. Under separate votes, Bogue's scheme failed, while the Olmsted Brothers' plan passed by an overwhelming majority. The \$500,000 parks bond, targeted primarily for development, also passed in 1912.</p>				
	<p>The Olmsted Brothers' plans fueled enormous enthusiasm for parks expansion in a booming Seattle. But, as the years passed and excitement over the Olmsted Brothers plans dwindled in the post-World War I era, concerns about funding the park system emerged, prompting two decades of administrative reform.</p>				
	<p>The City charter was amended in 1925, forbidding the purchase of property for parks beyond available funding. In 1926, a committee analyzed ways in which parks, schools, and the community could cooperatively combine their efforts toward providing recreational open space.</p>				
				<p>Playground Movement</p> <p>As part of the larger progressive social movement occurring at the turn of the twentieth century, the Playground Movement advocated neighborhood playgrounds in which children could participate in supervised recreation. The movement was fueled by the notion that a good and upright society would begin with clean and disciplined children. Founded in 1908 by Austin E. Griffiths, the Seattle Playground Association advocated a playground "within walking distance of every child". At right is Hiawatha Playfield in 1914, designed by the Olmsted Brothers and completed in 1910.</p> 	

1925-1945

1931:
10-year parks plan to
better utilize facilities

The City's pride in its park system is evident in newspaper articles of the 1930's. Despite this obvious pride, the park system, like most institutions at the beginning of the Great Depression, was short of funds. These funding restrictions were reflected in a 1931, 10-year parks plan by E. R. Hoffman that tried to better utilize existing park facilities, add space to those parks in need, and purchase property in areas of the City lacking park facilities.

1935:
WPA is established

Then the Works Progress Administration and other state and federal relief programs stepped in. Hoffman's 1931 parks plan provided the guidance that made preservation of the Olmsted Brothers system a priority. The WPA provided workers and funds to support numerous park development, restoration and infrastructure projects. WPA workers constructed several prominent park buildings and structures, and without WPA help, Seattle's park system would have suffered from neglect.



1945:
Highland Park
Playground served as
a temporary military
facility during World
War II

By 1940, Seattle's population had risen to 368,302. With World War II, the demand for recreational programs for military personnel and their families was tremendous, and Seattle's parks were needed by the military for temporary wartime facilities. The Parks Department responded with expanded programs and the creation of a cadre of recreational professionals. The 1944-1946 Federal Lanham Act grant provided funding for recreation leadership programs and improvements to areas where servicemen had been stationed or processed.

Continued city growth, coupled with the severe strain of military occupation, highlighted the need for expansion of Seattle's park system in the years following World War II.

Federal Relief



The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was one of several relief measures put in place to stem massive levels of unemployment during the Great Depression. The WPA appropriated funds and created projects to employ millions of Americans in fields as varied

as highway and building construction, slum clearance, rural rehabilitation, and reforestation. Pictured are two Seattle men replacing a retaining wall along Gilman Avenue on Queen Anne Hill. Nationwide, from 1935 to 1943, the WPA built 651,087 miles of highways, roads, and streets; and constructed, repaired, or improved thousands more bridges, public buildings, parks, and airports.

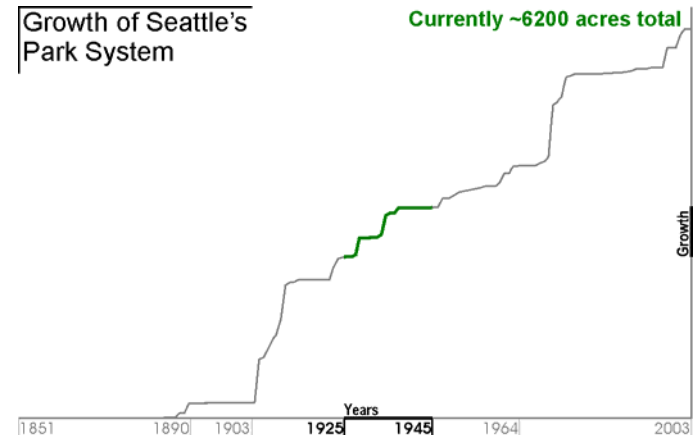
Growth of Seattle's
Park System

Figure 7: Parks Growth, 1925-1945.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

INTRODUCTION	PAST	IDENTIFICATION	PRESENT	IMPLEMENTATION	FUTURE
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1945-1964

Seattle emerged from World War II with a population of over 400,000 and an enthusiasm for parks. The City's development accelerated as explosive post-war population growth created a demand for new housing and shopping centers throughout the region.

1946-1948:
\$3.7M provided to fund
parks improvements

In 1946 and 1948, Seattle parks benefited from an infusion of \$3.7 million from a \$1.2 million state grant and a \$2.5 million voter-approved park bond. Then, in 1950, the joint cooperative planning between schools and parks – recommended by the Olmsted Brothers – finally began with the Laurelhurst gymnasium and playfield.

1950:
Park/school joint
planning begins

The *1954 Preliminary Park and Recreation Plan*, part of the City Comprehensive Plan, reflected the good feeling of a nation emerging from years of hardship. The plan advocated recreation space based on population density, anticipating that these standards would lead to more parks in the denser parts of the city. However, the defeat of three multi-million dollar bonds over the next four years prevented the plan from becoming more than a vision.

1954:
Seattle's last broad-
scale City
comprehensive
planning effort

1960:
\$4,500,000 parks bond

Parks received funding again in 1960 with the passage of the \$4.5 million Park Improvement Bond. As the nation began to recognize a new, decentralized form of urban development, focus shifted to the neighborhoods. Field houses became recreation centers and then community centers, each with its own volunteer advisory council to support the recreation staff.



1962:
Seattle hosts the
World's Fair

With a population nearing a half million, demand for parks and recreation continued to grow throughout the 1960's.

Suburban Growth

In the years following World War II, America experienced a dramatic change in development patterns. Aided by the GI Bill, troops returning from the war purchased homes in record numbers, prompting a massive and immediate response in the home building sector. This growth in new home construction, coupled with increased automobile ownership and new freeways, expanded urban boundaries and forced many local governments to modify their policies to reflect this new larger city dimension. In Seattle, voters approved northern city expansion, the nation's first modern shopping mall opened its doors, and the Alaskan Way Viaduct was completed. Pictured here is Aurora Avenue looking north from 41st Street in 1951.

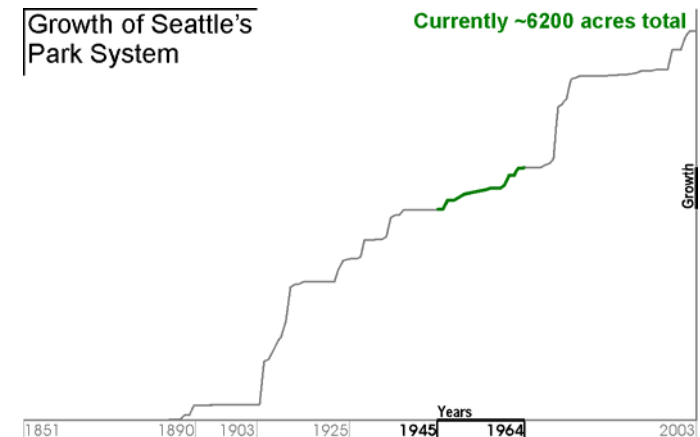


Figure 8: Parks Growth, 1945-1964.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.

1965-2003

1968:
\$65 million Forward
Thrust Bond passes for
acquisition and
development

1970:
"Boeing Bust" peaks

1984:
\$28 million bond for
park improvements

1989:
\$41 million Open
Space and Trails bond



Homer Harris Park

A new era of parks expansion began with passage of the Forward Thrust Bond in 1968, which allocated \$65 million for specified parks projects over a twelve year period. With the help of matching funds and interest, by 1980 this \$65 million had increased to approximately \$120 million. These funds enabled the City to acquire major waterfront park land; improve existing parks; add playgrounds, playfields and neighborhood parks in every community; build swimming pools and recreation centers; construct an indoor tennis center; improve the zoo; build an aquarium; and, develop downtown parks. In fact, parks acquired during the Forward Thrust era account for roughly 40 percent of existing park space in Seattle.

However, by the late 1970's, federal grants for park acquisition and development, so abundant in the early 1970's, had ceased to exist, while severe unemployment and economic depression in the region, fueled by a downturn in the nation's aerospace industry, reduced tax revenues. Massive budget cuts were made in the growing park system, especially in terms of grounds maintenance.

Finally, after two decades of decline, Seattle began to grow again. Serious deterioration in the entire park system due to budget constraints prompted the voters to approve \$28 million for improvements in 1984 and \$41 million for open space and trails in 1989.

Today, Seattle is a city of roughly 560,000 people, still enthusiastic about their parks and recreation system, and still supporting it.

Seattle Today

Seattle is a metropolitan center of commerce and culture, currently home to nearly 600,000 people, with a metropolitan population of over 3 million. From the beginning, Seattle's parks and recreation system has played an important role in developing the City's urban fabric and defining its identity. The result is a park system that rivals that of any other City; one that continues to provide Seattle citizens with varied, numerous, and enjoyable choices for recreation and amusement – a park system that will continue to thrive for years to come.



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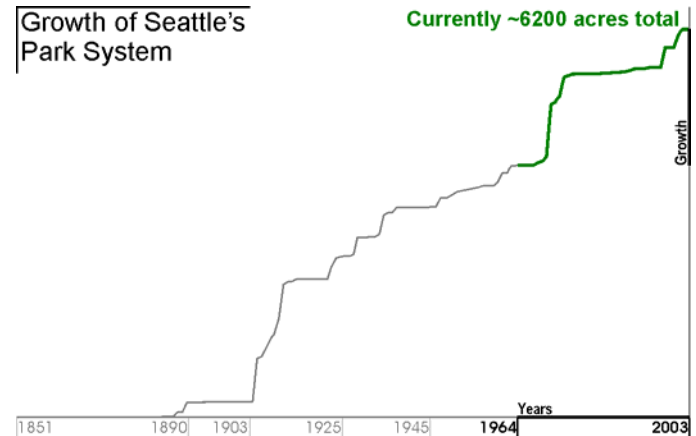


Figure 9: Parks Growth, 1964-2003.
NOTE: The line is only an approximation.